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ABSTRACT

Storytellers from the time of the cave dwellers to the invention of radio entertained and passed along family and cultural heritage. With the invention of radio, a listener was no longer required to face the source of the voice or to maintain eye contact with the story teller. With television, there are sounds without speakers, voices without value, and the imaginative discourse between speaker and listeners has been banished by the hardsell hypnosis of life's literal electronic translations through a tube. The changes in communication have diminished the opportunities for young people to develop a love of reading not only because television has led an audience away from print but because reading in school is taking on many of the same characteristics of fleshless, mechanistic, hypnotic communication that typify the generally declining human relationship of speaker and listener, hence writer and reader. Two ways to rebuild the expressive and motivating force of the oral language tradition that once nourished the love of reading are to revive storytelling and stress the language experience approach. They both capitalize on the essential urges of pupils to associate, communicate, and relate experience and self to others. (TJ)

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READING: MAY THE FORCE RETURN TO US!

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See a storyteller cast a spell of literary magic on a group of enthralled youngsters and you will recognize the ancient basis for a love of reading that is today becoming mere nostalgia while inspired human voices give way to crackling silver screens, phosphorescent tubes, and ditto sheets falling like snow from bureaucratic duplicating machines. When young people of earlier generations became devoted to reading without the expenditure of billions for instructional technology, they likely began by hearing a good tale at someone's knee. Let's purposefully indulge nostalgia to consider how far we have traveled in today's technocracy away from the old enchantments of the oral tradition which were the roots of reading.

Can you imagine this ancient scene? In a dusky stone dwelling, perhaps even a cave, fire-flickered walls resound with the resonant, earnest voice of a magical myth-maker, a voice penetrating the ears and hearts of an assembled throng while wild dogs howl as though trying to compete with the cadences of the speaker. What immensely important message commands the tribe's attention? What rites, what beliefs, what fears fascinate the rapt listeners?

Possibly, you would be more at home picturing small-town America before Marconian magic came of age. Here, the walls of your wooden house are bathed in soft lamplight while you listen to the rhythms of your father's voice flowing over his gathered clan in the room like the hissing of the fireplace log;

he tells a tale of business or reads aloud to the family from a popular periodical as family members participate in the conjured reveries of imagination.

Moving along to a post-Marconian family scene in our society of the twenties, thirties, or forties, you should have no difficulty forming an image of post-literate communication, for doubtless you have seen the televised Waltons and know the speaker occupying their center stage has a wooden skin and arteries of copper to replace flesh and blood. This newfangled family sits in the presence of a wooden box from which emanates a human voice; significantly, the assembled listeners are no longer expected to sit facing the voice, and it is no longer necessary for them to maintain eye contact with the source of the words, for these folk are audience to a machine. Still, with radio's novelty, the whole family is listening to the same voice, discussing it together, and likely even caring about what it says.

Now, in our technocratic age, nostalgia must cease and observation replaces imagination. Conduct this experiment: prying a family member from his or her private television, or exorcising your own enthrallment by "Hawaii Five-0," darken the room and sit with your back to the magical tube to study the wall opposing it. See the flickerings of demon neon, of phosphorized energy, and listen to cacophonous metallic voices. Consider how the electronic flask of modern communicative alchemy transmutes life's gold into images of lead. What immensely important message commands your attention? Now, in the presence of this machine, what rites, what beliefs, what fears motivate you?

In our entrancement by mechanistic modern communication, we hear sounds without speakers, voices without value. That old magic of communally-meaningful, imaginative discourse between speaker and listeners has been banished by the hardsell hypnosis of life's literal electronic translations through a tube,

glassily. The gift of tongues has become the gift of tubes, and people may be seen walking the streets with crackling voices strapped to them. In their fleshless distance from human contact, even the direst news reports hinting nuclear holocaust are witnessed without urgency, with only passing interest. The technocratic relationship of speaker and audience resembles the distant B-52 pilot who loosed whispering bombs or defoliant with a finger on persons below he never saw, knew, or cared about. The gadgetry transfixes us and we hardly recognize Howard Cosell without his headset.

The changes in communication marked by the movement from our communal presence in front of the ancient myth-maker chanting an urgent message with earnest voice to our individualized mesmerization by the fleshless tube broadcasting trivia diminish the opportunities for today's young people to develop a love of reading; this is happening not simply because television has Pied Piped an audience from print, but likewise because reading in school is taking on many of the same characteristics of fleshless, mechanistic, hypnotic communication that typify the generally declining human relationship of speaker and listener, hence writer and reader. The cultural context of communication and reading in school is shifting from the old consensus marked by ethos, myth, and religion to the modern schisms of relativism, private truth, and the secular competitions of the commercial marketplace. Even while we are becoming more isolated in our private meanings, the intimacy of person-to-person, face-to-face communication is depersonalized by machines and media that usurp the human presence. And the audience, once a communal focus for sharing human experience and belonging in a social way, is becoming narrowed to the individual person who is a consumer of messages.

In the contemporary schoolhouse, the reading program mirrors these larger social changes in communication. Visit an elementary classroom and

observe children literally plugged in to media with wires leading to their brains, or fastened by invisible connectors, like wired marionettes, as they gaze at t.v. or other visual media. See children working in isolation on ditto sheets or programmed workbooks. Watch a pupil consume pre-packaged information in the private booth of a learning station or center. Where are the inspired voices, the meaningful messages, the human exchange, the communal audience? The impact of depersonalized communication, trivialized messages, and the loss of the audience as a focus for communal sharing and being is evident in the considerable information we now have of the declining interest and skill in reading of the American public, young and old.

How can we return to the expressive and motivating force of the oral language tradition that once nourished the love of reading? A 1978 Time magazine article indicates that we should choose the shortest route in our quest for the vital roots of reading: we should revive the ancient art of storytelling in the schools. Jay O'Callahan has excavated these folk roots of communication with unusual success as a "modern spellbinder" by spending the past year telling stories to nearly fifty thousand people, mostly schoolchildren. Using dramatic tones and gestures, but no props or costumes, O'Callahan's captivation of youngsters with tales suggests an opportunity for motivating children in language arts in a depersonalized bureaucratic age when children's reading skills and interests are declining despite the expenditure of billions of dollars for new reading programs, machines, and materials.

It seems an irony that the storyteller O'Callahan, a stranger to the educational establishment, should be so successful in putting into practice several approaches to reading instruction that teachers have known about for years but seldom activated because of the more heavily promoted materials of the linguists, publishers, programmers, and accountability advocates. What

else than a request for bringing back the personal touch and folk basis for language arts learning is Sylvia Ashton-Warner's impassioned description of developing literacy among the Maori in Teacher?

Back to these first words. To these first books.
They must be made out of the stuff of the child
itself. I reach a hand into the mind of the child,
bring out a handful of the stuff I find there,
and use that as our first working material.

.....
And in this dynamic material, within the familiarity
and security of it, the Maori finds that words have
intense meaning to him, from which cannot help but
arise a love of reading.

Warner's use of the "key vocabulary" of words powerfully significant to youngsters is a naturalistic process akin to the social interaction approach of James Moffett and Betty Wagner (A Student-centered Language Arts and Reading Curriculum, k-13). Moffett and Wagner would invest the reading program with the old elements of social communicative reality by centering language arts studies on the naturalistic social interactions that motivate pupils so well (drama, role-playing, puppetry, dance, storytelling). Storytelling, in particular, would seem to capitalize on the essential urges of pupils to associate, communicate, and relate experience and self to others, especially in speaker/audience ensembles.

The "language experience approach" advocated by Roach Van Allen is similarly predicated on the social urges to communicate that children bring to school because "the reading of printed materials is introduced through procedures of 'reading' the real environment of people and things." On the foundation of the child's oral proficiency and urge to express personal experience, Van Allen builds a four-stage structure of instructional language activities to lead the learner from a raw individualized experiencing of life to the controlled communication of these experiences as a sender and receiver of printed language:

1. What I think about, I can talk about.
2. What I say, I can write (or someone can write for me).
3. What I can write, I can read (and others can read, too).
4. I can read what I have written, and I can also read what other people have written for me to read.

Throughout this "language experience" process, the learner is intimately involved with audiences, in social relationships as a sender or receiver. In effect, each child becomes a storyteller and a story-listener in a logical transition from the oral tradition to the reading of printed matter. The genius of "language experience" exists in the ancient notion that telling and hearing stories is an important human experience.

Whatever approaches to reading the teacher adopts, he or she ought to heed the worth of storytelling and the oral tradition in the reading process by considering these questions:

1. How do I initiate and develop person-to-person communicative interactions among pupils?
2. How do I create and use audiences for oracy?
3. How significant to pupils is the content of the messages that make up the language arts program?
4. Is the language arts curriculum I sponsor just another form of routine, mechanistic bureaucracy, or is it as lively and spontaneous as the storyteller's art?

Mothball your machines. Return your ditto paper to its storage cabinet. Send your programmed workbooks back to the profiteering publishers. Look for the Force of the oral tradition of storytelling: it will serve you and your pupils well.